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Richard Harwood

A Quick Peek at the Bush Diaries

There occurred last week one of the culminating events of the six-year inquiry into the Iran-contra scandal. It was the release of excerpts from the personal diaries of George Bush—either 32 pages or 45 pages, depending on which paper you read—and 174 pages of a deposition given by Bush to Iran-contra prosecutors in January 1988. Neither had ever been previously made available to the press and, through the press—theoretically—to the American people.

They dealt directly with a question that has hovered, buzzard-like, over Bush for several years: Had he been telling the truth or lying since 1986 about his involvement or noninvolvement in this affair? They were not, as it turned out, as colorful as some of the Nixon tapes from the Watergate era. But they addressed an issue in which the public had a major interest. So did the special counsel in this case, Laurence Walsh, who has been implying in recent weeks that Bush was vulnerable to a prosecution involving these very documents.

On Friday, Jan. 15, the documents were "made public" in the sense that the White House turned them over to newspapers, magazines, radio and television correspondents and whoever else qualified on that day as a member of the press corps.

They were not, however, "made public" in the sense that they were made available to the public by the press. The networks did not set aside time for "special reports" as they often do when important events occur. Time and Newsweek did not tear up their magazines that weekend to publish special sections on what the

New York Times described as "the extraordinary stream-of-consciousness-monologue" contained within the Bush diary. In fact, by the Times's own standards, it gave short shrift to the materials, reprinting only 36 inches of excerpts.

The Post stripped the story across the top of its front page with a headline and opening paragraph suggesting that Bush was up to his

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neck in the Iran-contra plot. Strangely, however, it devoted no space at all to the transcripts—not an inch. The Baltimore Sun interpreted the materials as a vindication of Bush (he was seen as a mere bit player in the affair) but printed less than a column of excerpts, which proved to be a few inches more than we got from the Wall Street Journal. Like The Post, the Journal printed no excerpts at all.

It is not often we have the chance to pry into the private diary of a sitting president of the United States. The New York Times reporter who read this "extraordinary" document wrote that it gave one the sense of being "a fly on the wall" observing while it happened the "panic and grope-ing-ness" that overwhelmed the White

House when the scandal broke in November 1986. The diary, he wrote, portrays Bush as a "blindly loyal" lackey to Ronald Reagan and as "an ambitious and calculating politician" whose main concern was the impact of Iran-contra on his own presidential prospects.

The Wall Street Journal, in an article written by one of my kinfolk, noted Bush's "fawning references to his boss" and his frequent use of the "prep school homilies that helped create his public image problem." One of the quoted profundities was: "The joy and spirit of Christmas was fun." A White House aide is quoted as saying that the diaries are far more "hilarious" than sinister.

Why, given all these testimonials, were we denied the hilarity, insights and voyeuristic thrills of reading for ourselves the Bush diaries? Why were we not given the opportunity to peruse and digest big chunks of the legal deposition that was said to be so sensitive and potentially incriminating that Special Counsel Walsh refused until a few days ago to make a copy available to Bush himself?

If the papers were to argue that newsprint is too expensive and space too dear, we would be unconvinced. At the time these materials were released, tons of newsprint and hundreds of pages of space were being lavished on evanescent pre-inaugural froth. If they were to argue that they distilled the essence of the material and told us all we needed to know, we would be unconvinced, because they disagreed among themselves on what was or wasn't pertinent and on what it all meant.

The Post implied (but never developed its

innuendo) that the materials lent weight to the notion that Bush, on this matter, had been a continental liar. The Times and the Sun concluded the opposite: that the materials tended to vindicate him. The Journal implied that the bombastic tug of war between the White House and special counsel over these materials had been empty posturing since they proved virtually nothing beyond the fact that Bush has no literary future.

This demonstrates, as all journalists are aware and as the public often suspects, that there are more ambiguities and fewer certainties in the work we do than we like to admit. It demonstrates the subjectivities that go into our presentation and interpretation of events.

James Russell Wiggins, a former editor of The Post who now publishes at Ellsworth, Maine, the world's finest small newspaper, used to remind us that the customers are entitled to one unvarnished crack at the facts, uncolored by whatever opinions, prejudices or speculations we might wish to bring to them. But we often seem incapable of that, functioning more as spin doctors than town criers. The antidote in cases such as this one is obvious: Lay the undoctored evidence before the people so they can weigh their judgments against ours and render their own verdicts. The Bush diaries and depositions were not released for the entertainment and titillation of a handful of people who, because of some accident of history, happen to possess press cards. The public, which, among other things, paid for them, also has an interest in what they contain.